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Europeanization in Pension Policy: the Crisis as a Game-Changer?

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Abstract

The actual effects of the European Union (EU) on member states' pension policy are more extensive and complex than the contractual basis suggests. In addition to the Open Method of Coordination, a genuine instrument of social policy, 'cross-effects' of the freedom of the internal market mediated by the ECJ, as well as fiscal policy 'interventions' in member states experiencing financial difficulties have risen in importance. The sovereign debt crisis has functioned as a 'game changer' that re-adjusted the balance between European influence and national autonomy, but so far only for the countries hit most by the crisis. As European influence in this supposed 'new phase' differs markedly depending on the respective budgetary situation as well as the 'well-preparedness' of national pension systems due to previous reforms and as informal rather than formal ways of exerting pressure were chosen, the consequences for other member states and the European pension policy 'architecture' as a whole are yet unclear.

Keywords

Pension Policy; Europeanization; crisis effects; Open Method of Co-ordination; budgetary consolidation

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This article addresses the question of whether the European Union (EU) has become a decisive factor in member states' pension policy and pension reforms and whether both the extent and the channels of such an influence have changed in the crisis[1] of the past few years. An analysis of national pension reforms in Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden in the period 2001-2015 shows that the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as a genuine social and pension policy instrument but also a soft one based on peer pressure and learning had limited influence on national policy choice. 'Interventions' by the European Court of Justice based on European anti-discrimination law occurred to a limited extent (Italy, Poland). By contrast, the reformed European economic governance instruments did exert substantial influence on pension reforms in times of crisis (as the case of Italy shows) as pensions account for a large share of public spending in EU member states. However, crises also acted as reform catalysts before the introduction of the Stability and Growth Pact (Sweden) or at least before its tightening (Germany). In addition, informal channels were more influential in the Italian case than the formal ones, namely the European Semester and the two Excessive Debt Procedures. Therefore, while a shift towards budgetary consolidation has undoubtedly occurred and it seems justified to state an increasing degree of Europeanization 'through the back door' for countries in crisis, it remains to be seen whether the crisis functions as a 'game-changer' in the sense of a fundamentally altered balance between the European level and the member states more generally, irrespective of their economic situation, size and political weight in the medium term.

THE EU - AN 'ILLUSIONARY DWARF'[2] IN PENSION POLICY?

The financial, economic and sovereign debt crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit, deepening rifts between individual and groups of member states, the electoral successes of populist and EU-critical parties, weakness in foreign policy – without doubt the EU is in an existential crisis. Nevertheless, major policy integration, often outside public attention, advances. This also applies to social and especially pension policy. Yet, the emphasis often lies in the notion that this has been and will remain a domain of the member states – as the contractual basis, according to which the organisation and financing of social security systems fall within member states' responsibility (Art. 153 (4)), suggests – while the European institutions in this field should not extend their activities beyond market creation (for a critical and differentiated view of the 'latecomer discourse' see Schmidt 2015: 15ff). In fact, the heterogeneous economic structure, economic performance and types of welfare states, the decision-making rules at the European level, the small budget for EU social policy, a high number of veto players and the preference of large parts of the political and administrative elites as well as of the electorate to maintain social policy within the national domain, pose significant barriers to the emergence of a strong European social policy (Anderson and Kaeding 2015; Schmidt 2015: 21ff.). At the same time, social policy is broadly accepted not only as an important factor of economic and demographic development, but also as a central aspect of the legitimacy and acceptance of a political system. To quote Jacques Delors, President of the Commission from 1985-1993, 'Nobody falls in love with a single market. We have to give Europe a soul' (cited in Leibfried and Obinger 2008: 346, translated by the author). Furthermore, social policy clearly cannot be separated from the single market and is subject to its influence, which leads to considerable spillover processes and initiatives of the community's institutions. Moreover, there are increasingly compelling reasons for more integration in this field in this current crisis: the performance gap between the European welfare states results in diverging levels of social assurance, which needs to be restored in its stabilising function in many member states and to be adjusted to demographic realities (Vandenbroucke 2014: 11ff.). The still widespread, despite notable exceptions (e.g. Anderson 2015; Falkner 2016; and see below), premise that the EU is a non-actor in social policy (Jacquot 2008: 11, also illustrated by the low priority of EU level activities in textbooks such as Dallinger 2016) undervalues relevant activities and initiatives, especially in the field of pension policy with its high share of social expenditure. Is the EU thus an 'illusionary dwarf' in pension policy, contrary to its public and, to a lesser extent, academic perception? Against this backdrop, this article discusses the following question: have influences from the European level become a decisive factor in member states' pension policy and pension reforms and, in particular, did the crisis function as a 'game-changer' in terms of the degree and channels of pension policy Europeanization? Following this short introduction, the next section gives an overview of the Europeanization literature as such and, more specifically, with a view to pension policy. The following sections are dedicated to methodology and the state of pension policy at the European level respectively, followed by an analysis of pension reforms in selected member states in terms of European influences, which are then discussed in comparative perspective and summed up in a short conclusion.

EUROPEANIZATION RESEARCH AND PENSION POLICY

Europeanization research can now be considered an established approach within integration research. After initial controversies concerning a working definition of Europeanization (e.g. Olsen 2002), Radaelli's definition is now widely accepted:

> processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies (Radaelli 2004: 3).

This paper joins this definition and places its focus on the download dimension of Europeanization,[3] understood as the extent to which national policies – as well as processes (politics) and structures (polities) (Featherstone 2002: 19; Radaelli 2003: 35), although not discussed in this article – are subject to EU-induced changes and via which channels.

The extent of Europeanization of national structures, policies and processes can be classified according to Radaelli (2003: 37f.) as 'inertia' (no change), 'absorption' (adaptation without fundamental change), 'transformation' (paradigmatic adjustment or system change) and 'retrenchment' (de-Europeanization). In terms of sources of Europeanization, the most obvious case is hierarchy, which can appear in the form of both positive and negative integration, the former via supranational legislation within or relevant to the respective field, the latter by excluding national regulatory options and triggering regulatory competition between member states (Scharpf 1999; Radaelli 2004: 12). For the former type, Börzel (1999) identifies a logic of 'goodness of fit', implying a high degree of change in cases of a moderate 'misfit' of European and national policies while a more basic misfit is expected to trigger resistance by national actors facing Europeanization pressures. With a view to pension policy, the positive form of hierarchy would, for example, include repercussions of anti-discrimination law while the Stability and Growth Pact and especially the new instruments of budgetary consolidation introduced in the crisis can be considered manifestations of the negative form (Radaelli 2004: 12). Other possible logics of Europeanization include 'usages of Europe' by national actors (Graziano, Jacquot and Palier 2011; Radaelli 2004: 4) and finally 'soft' influences such as learning effects and changes in national discourses (Radaelli 2004: 12; Knill and Lehmkuhl 2002: 171ff.). As for pension policy, the Open Method of Coordination was explicitly designed for this latter purpose and can thus be expected to foster Europeanization within a non-hierarchical framework.

EUROPEANIZATION IN SOCIAL AND PENSION POLICY

Despite a growing body of research on Europeanization, pension policy within this field of research has been relatively neglected. Whereas there are numerous studies on the OMC as such (e.g. Heidenreich and Zeitlin 2009; Zeitlin, Barcevicius and Weishaupt 2014) and some on the social policy consequences of the reformed Stability and Growth Pact (e.g. De la Porte and Heins 2015) as well as several volumes on the Europeanization of social policy more generally (Anderson 2015; Kvist and Saari 2007; Graziano, Jacquot and Palier 2011), Europeanization in pension policy has received less attention.[4] Some publications discuss the OMC in this field (e.g. Natali 2007), only a few, albeit notable others take into account the impact of crisis management measures on pension reform (De la Porte and Heins 2015: 2). Hinrichs and Brosig (2013) discuss pension reforms in nine EU member states (Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the UK) and conclude that rapid policy changes have occurred which were in most cases imposed by external actors (ibid.: 32). Natali and Stamati (2013) analyse recent pension reforms in Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK against the backdrop of the crisis, and focus on the role of unions in this process. Anderson and Kaeding (2015) compare reforms in Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium with a view to analysing the influences of EU gender equality law and the run-up to the European Monetary Union's convergence criteria. Their focus is on domestic institutions and programme structures to explain different patterns of adaptation. Possible changes induced by the crisis are briefly pointed out ('[t]he 2010–2011 sovereign debt crisis dramatically changes the nature of the EMU constraint (2015: 249)), but not discussed any further. Thus, while all these studies analyse important aspects of current pension reforms in Europe, they either focus exclusively on the period since the onset of the crisis (Hinrichs and Brosig 2013; Natali and Stamati 2013) or address instruments of budgetary consolidation in the early days of the EMU only (Anderson and Kaeding).

This article discusses two possible phases of pension reforms, the heyday of the OMC on pensions since 2001 on the one hand and the era of crisis management since 2010 on the other, characterised by increasing public debt in several member states, related fiscal consolidation efforts and new instruments to strengthen the SGP – especially with the introduction of the European semester – while the OMC is continued on paper only, and tries to specify whether a change of the European 'rules of the game' has occurred. Can we observe a shift from the OMC to instruments of budgetary consolidation and, if so, does it go along with increased pressure on member states and thus intensified Europeanization?

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the analysis of four member states (Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden), which, similarly to Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990, often criticised, but still the established point of reference) represent different types of welfare states, and which have a certain weight within the EU due to their size, population and economic power, while only some are members of the Eurozone. While Italy was (and is) particularly affected by the sovereign debt crisis, Germany had experienced budgetary difficulties in the late 1990s and early 2000s and Poland still had to cope with the challenges of transformation while Sweden had gone through a severe economic crisis in the early 1990s and was less affected later. Comprehensive pension reforms were implemented in all four countries, quite obviously related to the respective crisis: in Sweden from 1994, in Germany from 2001, in Poland from 1999 and in Italy more or less continuously from 1992 onwards, but with a remarkable acceleration in 2011. As stated before, it is the research interest of this paper to figure out whether these national reforms – including their respective follow-up measures – had a European dimension (rather than being caused by the crises themselves) and whether European influences have grown in importance over time.

Methodologically, primary sources (documents of the EU institutions and national ministries, especially recommendations and national strategy documents within the framework of the OMC on the one hand and the European Semester on the other) and secondary literature were analysed to compare national pension policies and reforms with the objectives formulated at EU level. Obviously, the mere fact that European recommendations and national policy documents correspond in terms of content and/or wording is not sufficient to indicate a causal relationship (Zohlnhöfer and Ostheim 2007: 333ff.). Even though references to the European level may provide indications of such a connection, national actors may use 'Europe' strategically in order to justify certain, and especially unpopular, measures, with the EU functioning as an additional source of legitimacy or as a scapegoat. Vice versa, national actors need not point to European sources of influence even in cases where these exist (ibid.: 334). In the latter case, European influences would be underestimated, in the former, an 'over-determination of the European factor' (Vink and Graziano 2007: 16) would occur. Thus, rather than trying to verify a causal relationship of any kind, a more realistic aim is to assess the plausibility of European influences, which can be achieved both by sequencing developments at both levels and by conducting expert interviews as a complement to document analysis (Zohlnhöfer and Ostheim 2007: 334). Roughly 60 guided expert interviews of about 60 minutes each with representatives of the relevant EU institutions, especially the Commission, and national institutions, primarily the ministries responsible for social affairs, but also for economics and finance, were conducted, of which only a selection is cited in this article. The list of interviews undertaken, indicating with which entities and when, can be found at the end of the article.

A POLICY FIELD IN THE MAKING

Attention to pension policy has increased significantly at the European level. On the one hand, member states face extensive and structurally similar demographic and financial challenges to their budget and fiscal policy, which has led in many cases to comprehensive reform activities, but also created a common problem for national economies through the single market and particularly through the economic and monetary union (EMU). Hence, a European dimension of pension policy has gradually developed over the past 20 years despite the absence of original jurisdiction, after other international organisations, including the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank, had already submitted proposals much earlier (Maier-Rigaud 2009). The latter proved to be significantly more influential in the transformation of the Central and Eastern European countries than the, at the time, largely passive EU (Orenstein 2008: 908). Although the EU does not elaborate a unitary approach for all member states due to the principle of subsidiarity and member state responsibility for social security systems, since about 2000, the Commission has implemented the multi-pillar approach of the World Bank (European Commission 2000). The overall objective is the financial sustainability of public pension systems, inter alia by reducing the debt level, and an increase in the employment rate, through a more flexible retirement age and the extension of working life (European Commission 2011: 6). All these approaches are summarised and systematised in the 2012 White Paper on adequate, safe and sustainable pensions (European Commission 2012). The central policy recommendations of the white paper are: raising the pension entry age plus adjusting it to life expectancy; restricting possibilities of early retirement; extending working life; harmonisation of the retirement age for men and women; and support of private and/or occupational pensions (European Commission 2012: 11). Since 2001, the Open Method of Coordination has been applied to pension policy (European Council 2001: 32). The member states publish National Strategy Reports (NSR) on their progress in pursuing common objectives with the three overarching criteria of adequacy, financial sustainability and modernisation of pension systems (e.g. European Commission 2005: 6f.). This process was later included in the OMC for social protection and social inclusion in the course of the 2006 'streamlining' (e.g., Zeitlin, Barcevicius and Weishaupt 2014: 2). The Commission and the Council jointly evaluate these reports and develop recommendations. Within the framework of the Europe2020 strategy, the member states now report their activities and progress in shorter National Social Reports following their National Reform Programmes (NRP) as part of the European Semester; the evaluation is part of the yearly report of the Social Policy Committee (SPC; Council of the European Union 2011: 5). The effectiveness of the OMC, however, has remained controversial both in principle and in the area of pension provision (among many others de la Porte and Pochet 2002; Zeitlin, Barcevicius and Weishaupt 2014; Heidenreich and Zeitlin 2009).

Public expenditure on pensions in 2013 amounted, on average, to 11.3 per cent of GDP in the EU-28 and 12.3 per cent in the Eurozone (European Commission 2015) and thus represented a significant share of state budgets. In addition to the 'soft' (because not enforced by sanctions) Open Method of Coordination, the pension systems of the member states are also a focus of European budgetary monitoring. The measures taken to address the financial, economic and sovereign debt crisis in this respect have further supplemented and strengthened the Stability and Growth Pact, namely the 'Six Pack' of 2011, in particular the introduction of the European Semester, the Fiscal Compact of 2013 and the Euro Plus Pact of 2011 (e.g. Schuknecht, Moutot, Rother and Stark 2011; Hilpold 2014). Within the framework of the European Semester, the member states submit budgetary and reform plans that are evaluated and lead to Country-Specific Recommendations (CSR) which have included pensions in some cases. Thereby, the former (at least rhetorical) balance between the aims of adequacy and sustainability was in fact given up to the benefit of the latter as both the instruments used and the increasing influence of actors such as DG Economic and Financial Affairs (ECFIN), the ECOFIN Council and the Economic Policy Committee (EPC) show.

THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN OBJECTIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON NATIONAL REFORMS

To what extent did national reforms in the four selected countries have a European dimension, either by way of the Open Method of Coordination or of budgetary instruments? Are we seeing a ‘new phase’ of European influence on national pension policy since the onset of the crisis? In Germany, cost increases within the Bismarckian social insurance system had already given rise to concern since the 1980s. In 1997, the conservative-liberal government had tried to introduce a sustainability factor into the existing pension formula which was immediately withdrawn by the ensuing red-green government in 1998. However, with the continental welfare states and especially Germany being the ‘sick man of Western Europe’ (Hemerijk 2013: 180) at that time, a paradigm shift was introduced with an encompassing reform in 2001. The introduction of additional funded private retirement provision with state allowances (the so-called Riester pension) meant the conversion to a multi-pillar system. As to potential European influences, the reform was carried out prior to the introduction of the OMC on pensions. Rather, the primary aim was to consolidate contribution rates and adjust the pension system to demographic developments. Thus, budgetary consolidation and the reduction of high non-wage labour costs were the main drivers of reform and do suggest a European dimension by way of the Stability and Growth Pact, although the relative weight of European influences is assessed differently (Hacker 2010: 121ff.; Hering 2006: 33; interviews 2, 4). In the following years, the reform was complemented especially by the introduction of a sustainability factor in 2004 and the increase of the retirement age to 67 in 2007 (Eichenhofer, Rische and Schmähl 2012: 172; Hacker 2010: 124f.). In the NSR for subsequent years (2002, 2005, 2006, 2008), the federal government emphasised the Commission's goals of adequacy, sustainability and modernisation, while repeatedly stressing their compatibility with the German reforms. In fact, the objectives and most of the concrete reform steps largely converged with the recommendations of the Commission and Council (Hacker 2010: 38), although the latter saw a need for further action concerning the employment rate of elderly people, access to occupational and private pensions and the high government debt rate (e.g. European Commission 2006). Nevertheless, European influences are mostly evaluated as rather small as a national expert commission, the so-called Rürup Commission (2002-2003), is seen as the main reform driver, whose final report barely mentions any European references. Furthermore, the OMC did not play an important role in the national reform discourse (Hacker 2010: 264; Schrader 2009: 54f; interviews 1, 2). The OMC was and is considered more as an institutionalised exchange platform without any serious impetus for national policy choice (interviews 1, 5), at most a trigger for pension policy debates, e.g. prior to raising the retirement age (Weishaupt 2014: 144; interview 3).

The next major reform measure was the so-called Pension Insurance Performance Improvement Act in 2013 which was evaluated mainly under the new budgetary instruments and criticised by the Council and Commission, as it could endanger financial sustainability and hinder the development of private pension provision (Council of the European Union 2014, No. 10). The fact that a reform which clearly deviated from Germany’s previous reform path could be implemented anyway is attributed to Germany’s economic and political position in the EU: large member states in relatively good fiscal positions obviously continue to have considerable leeway over their legislation (interviews 2, 3, 4). Overall, thus, an ambivalent picture emerges in terms of budgetary instruments: in light of serious economic difficulties in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Stability and Growth Pact had discernible influence on fundamental reforms (Hering 2006; Hinrichs 2008: 205), but as the 2013 pension package openly contradicts the CSR, a somewhat counter-intuitive trend can be observed later on, namely a seemingly shrinking influence in spite of advanced European instruments.

In Sweden, the original Beveridge model (folkpension) had been supplemented by an income-related component (ATP) in the 1960s. After some cost-reduction efforts in the 1980s (Anderson and Immergut 2009: 367f.), the Swedish economy stumbled into a deep crisis in the early 1990s which served as a catalyst for a large pension reform from 1994. A multi-pillar system was introduced, including in its first pillar a (subsidiary) basic, an earnings-related and a mandatory funded ‘premium pension’, accompanied by supplementary mechanisms for automatic adjustment to available financial resources and life expectancy (Anderson and Immergut 2009: 368ff.; Natali 2011: 19; Natali and Stamati 2013: 56f.). Thus, the central reform of the Swedish pension system, often described as one of the most radical and future-orientated worldwide (Natali 2011: 11; Anderson and Immergut 2009: 349), had already been implemented when the OMC on pensions had its start, and Sweden was not even a member of the European Union when the ‘grand reform’ was decided upon. Only small corrections to compensate for the activation of the adjustment mechanism in 2010 were carried out later (Settergren 2011; Natali and Stamati 2013: 60). Similarly to Germany, the reform direction converges largely with the European recommendations, but the sequencing of developments speaks against European influence (whether there is an influence in the other direction, i.e. an orientation of European pension objectives towards the Swedish model, cannot be discussed in this paper). As to possible OMC influences later on, Swedish actors seem overall sceptical beyond the function as a framework for knowledge-sharing, mainly due to the ‘maturity’ and complexity of the Swedish welfare state (interviews 6, 7, 8, 9; Jacobsson 2005), although parallel discourses on, for example, late access to the labour market, pension age or taxation of pensions, are identified by some experts (interviews 6, 7). The rather descriptive nature of the NSRs especially after 2005 (e.g. Swedish Ministry of Social Affairs 2010) as well as the outright rejection of certain criticisms (ibid.: 45) confirm this finding.

The influence of budgetary instruments on Sweden as a non-member of the Eurozone with above average economic data can be assumed to be rather low as well (interviews 6, 9). Rather, ‘the crisis confirmed the traditional strengths of the [reformed] Swedish pension system and labour market’ (Natali and Stamati 2013: 58), and thus, only minor adjustments were made. Nevertheless, the Swedish Government explicitly referred to the 2010 Joint Report on Pensions (European Commission 2010) as an occasion for labour market reforms (Swedish Ministry of Social Affairs 2010a: 1) which were also meant to stabilise the pension system in light of decreasing employment and lower investment in private pensions although no recommendations on pensions as such had been issued. However, from 2011, recommendations on youth employment in the context of population ageing were not addressed to a similar degree by the Swedish government, causing the European Commission (2015a: 2) to attest Sweden’s ‘limited progress’ in implementing the CSR. All in all, neither the OMC nor budgetary instruments had a decisive influence on Swedish pension policy. Non-membership in the Eurozone, comparatively low affectedness by the crisis and Sweden’s position as a pension policy ‘avant-garde’ provide parts of the explanation to this finding.

The case of Poland is complicated due to deviations in the classification of pillars. In the course of systemic transformation and against the backdrop of cost expansion and shrinking contributions (Chlon, Góra and Rutkowski 1999), a large pension reform was carried out in 1999, which included the transformation of the former single (but fragmented according to occupational groups) to a multi-pillar model, but the second pillar differs from the conventional model. It is in fact a unit within the first pillar and despite its initial private management actually represents a state component. For this central reform of 1999, any influence of the EU in the wake of a possible EU accession is ruled out (Ferge and Juhász 2004: 234; interviews 10, 11). Instead, the World Bank joined in as a central player and promoted Sweden, but first and foremost non-European countries such as Chile and Argentina as examples to follow (Orenstein 2008: 910 and 2005: 195). When the OMC started soon after, Poland presented its reforms as congruent with European goals although persistent deficits are admitted in the NSR 2005 and 2008, such as a low employment rate, expensive special systems specifically for agriculture, a gender imbalance and persistent funding problems, which have been repeatedly criticised by the Council and the Commission (European Commission 2006: 231ff; 2009: 81ff.). While this speaks against substantial OMC effects and the experts interviewed also deny a significant European influence through the OMC (interviews 10, 11, 12), Żukowski (2012: 8) points to an OMC impetus for an intensified debate about future replacement rates, active ageing and balancing the aims of adequacy and fiscal sustainability.

The instruments of budget surveillance can be divided into the two Excessive Deficit Procedures (EDP, 2004-2008 and 2009-2015) on the one hand, and the CSR within the European Semester on the other. Under the first EDP there were differences with respect to the incorporation of the capital-based (second) pillar to the public budget, which Eurostat (2004) dismissed in the end. In the second EDP, there was contention about the classification of the 1999 reform as systemic and therefore as an 'extenuating circumstance' in the assessment of the budget deficit. Since Poland significantly exceeded the deficit limit, the Commission initially rejected their argument (European Commission 2009a: 10) but revised this view after the transfer of parts of the second pillar contributions to a governmental subaccount (European Commission 2012a: 10). As a result of the design of the second pillar sketched above, the state had lost out on income with a negative impact on the budget, and from 2011 onward, a significant portion of contributions was transferred to a ZUS subaccount to finance current pensions and to reduce the deficit; since 2014, the contributions are automatically sent to ZUS when an opt-in fund model (OFE) is absent (Frasyniuk-Pietrcyk 2014 and Orenstein 2011; Naczyk and Domonkos 2016 on the realignment of pension privatisation in and since the crisis). Although the EDP was ceased in 2015 (European Commission 2015b: 4), the abolition of the mandatory OFE membership was criticised as a deviation from the reformed system and as endangering long-term stability (Eurostat 2014).

Other central elements of the recent Polish reforms included the general elimination of early retirement from 2009 and the raising of the retirement age to 67 (for men by 2020, for women by 2040) in 2013. Both measures met central European demands, but the 2011-2015 CSR continuously demanded an increase in the employment rate and the abolition of special systems. The fact that the Polish government has not implemented the second point nor significantly consolidated its budget suggests scepticism towards the effectiveness of the CSR towards Poland as a non-member of the Eurozone barely affected by the crisis and with a reformed system that was attested moderate risks in terms of sustainability only (Natali and Stamati 2013: 35f.). The opinions of the surveyed experts paint an ambivalent picture: public pressure fuelled by the media based on European arguments and especially the second EDP seems convincing for some, while others see the constitutionally enshrined national debt limit as the real motive and the European aspects mainly as an auxiliary argument to implement the modifications to the pensions system in 2011 and 2014 (interviews 10, 11, 12). It is indisputable, however, that the decision by Eurostat (2004) mentioned above had a significant legal impact as well as the ECJ ruling (ECJ 2011) that a 5 per cent limit of foreign investment for the private investment companies that manage the OFE was inadmissible. To conclude, while there is a clear influence of the ECJ in specific areas, the balance sheet is more ambivalent in terms of fiscal surveillance and European coordination. While both instruments were at times used as an argumentation aid by national actors, neither the OMC nor fiscal instruments themselves constituted a major factor in reform debates. In terms of possible changes due to the crisis, a gradual modification rather than a transition to more binding obligations has occurred which leaves Poland with persistent financial pressures but considerable freedom of choice of instruments, e.g. in the absence of EDP sanctions for non-members of the Eurozone.

In the 1990s, the previous one-pillar pension system in Italy was restructured into a multi-pillar system with the Amato and Dini reforms and the retirement age was gradually increased in subsequent years (Ferrera and Jessoula 2009: 431ff.). In addition, voluntary private provision was introduced and the benefit calculation was modified, albeit with a long transitional period (ibid.: 437; Hinrichs and Brosig 2013: 13f.). Unlike in the other member states, the European context played a central role for budgetary decision making from the beginning, since the convergence criteria towards EMU were seen as drivers of modernisation (Anderson and Kaeding 2015: 244) that allowed for circumvention of domestic obstacles to reforming the (at least for labour market 'insiders') rather generous old system. The following years can be understood as a 'permanent transition' with further adjustments (Natali and Stamati 2013: 49), an expansion of the second and third pillar as well as increased incentives for a later retirement, while European influence remains an ambivalent issue. Although the OMC was used as supporting argument and selective inspiration, in particular the criterion of adequacy (Sacchi 2008: 163), it is not possible to prove substantive influence or learning due to the earlier comprehensive reform (Sacchi 2007: 89; interviews 13, 14, 15) – with one exception: the harmonization of the pension age for men and women in the public sector was enforced by the Commission and the ECJ (2008; Natali and Stamati 2013: 49).

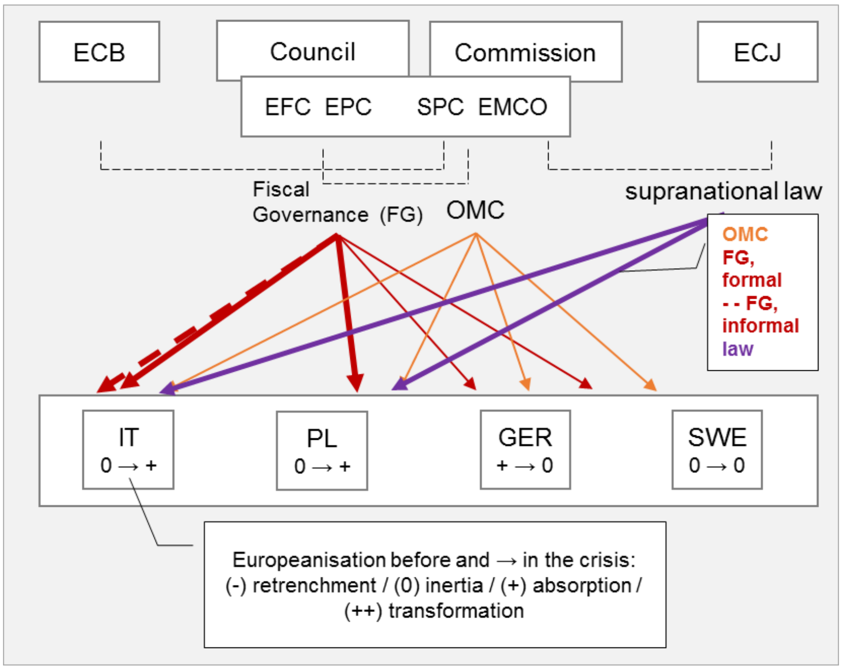
Rather, the economic and sovereign debt crisis served as a catalyst for Italy to implement further reforms, especially the Fornero reform of 2011, which included, inter alia, a shortened transition period to the new system, a further increase (and alignment for men and women also in the public sector) of the retirement age, and the abolition of the so-called seniority pensions (Jessoula and Pavolini 2012: 8). The double pressure of EU and financial markets (Pavolini, Léon, Guillén and Ascoli 2014: 9) towards a stronger focus on financial sustainability was more impactful than the two deficit procedures against Italy 2005-2008 and 2009-2013 in which the pension system was not a core issue. Instead of using formal instruments such as the CSR, a joint letter of the European and Italian Central Bank (Draghi and Trichet 2011) pressured the Italian government to implement concrete reforms, including deadlines, which were put in practice immediately after the resignation of the Berlusconi government. In that sense, considerable pressure was put on Italy (Jessoula and Pavolini 2013: 15; Pavolini et al. 2014: 12; Sacchi 2014: 7f.; interviews 13, 14) and the sequencing of events clearly hints at a strong European impetus. Thus, while the crisis did change the rules of the game in the case of Italy, not just in an economic sense, but also with a view to the balance between national autonomy and EU level 'interference' in pension policy, informal channels were used instead of pension-related CSR or the two EDPs (Jessoula and Pavolini 2013: 15; De la Porte and Natali 2014: 744f.; interview 13).

DISCUSSION

All four countries have implemented encompassing pension reforms including a conversion to a multi-pillar system in the past twenty years, but at different points in time and with a diverging level of European influences. If we, for the sake of argument, assume an 'OMC phase' (2001-2009) and a 'crisis phase' (2010-today, see above), is there evidence for increased EU influence in the latter phase?

Comparing the cases at hand, the overall result is a weak influence of the OMC on pensions, irrespective of the type of welfare state or economic conditions. Central reforms were often introduced before the OMC's start and only gradually complemented later (Germany, Poland, Sweden). While the respective national strategies paid lip service to European objectives and recommendations, these were virtually absent in national public discussions and the reform paths hardly deviated from their previous direction which had its origin either in national expert commissions (Germany, Sweden) and/or other institutional institutions (Poland). Only in the case of Italy can the OMC be seen as partially relevant for reform measures in the early 2000s, but it was mainly used as a selective inspiration and argumentation aid. Below the line, these findings confirm OMC critics who view the OMC as a sales support and selective amplifier for policies that would have been pursued at the national level anyway (Zeitlin, Barcevicius and Weishaupt 2014: 6 among many others). Similar criticism has been expressed towards the European Employment Strategy (e.g. Copeland and ter Haar 2013) even though, compared with the OMC on pensions, the former has the advantages of an explicit anchoring in the treaties as well as a longer period of application.

The effect of fiscal instruments is a mixed picture: while post-2009 reforms usually aim at financial sustainability, the extent of European pressure is, hardly surprisingly, strongly influenced by the economic situation of the respective country. In that sense, we can assume some influence on Germany in the beginning of the 2000s, when the country was in a difficult budgetary situation, but significantly lower influence in the subsequent years including the supposed 'new phase' from 2010. Sweden was not subject to substantial pressure either, given its good economic and employment data and forecasts as well as the different reach that possible sanctions have on members and non-members of the Eurozone. Nevertheless, the deep crisis in the early 1990s was an obvious trigger for the restructuring of the Swedish pension system which tentatively suggests that the fact of being in economic crisis as such might be decisive and would then only be amplified by the SGP. Nevertheless, a certain pressure for pension reform arises in the wake of the EDP for the non-EMU member Poland. Above all, however, considerable pressure – beyond the mere fact of being in a state of fiscal crisis – was put on the 'countries in crisis', as represented by Italy, from 2010 onwards, although in this case less formally as part of the respective EDPs and the European Semester but rather informally, especially by means of the 'ECB-letter'.



ECB: European Central Bank, ECJ: European Court of Justice, EFC: Economic and Financial Committee, EPC: Economic Policy Committee, SPC: Social Policy Committee: EMCO: Employment Committee, OMC: Open Method of Coordination, FG: Fiscal Governance. Source: own diagram, categories based on Radaelli 2003.

Thus, while a shift from the OMC as the EU's central pension policy instrument towards the reformed SGP is obvious (e.g. interviews 11, 18), the picture that emerges is more nuanced than the thesis of a 'new phase' of increased European influence suggests, although it is indeed obvious that 'countries most affected by economic recession have reformed the most' (Natali and Stamati 2013: 64). First, the de-facto binding effect of Country-Specific Recommendations differs depending on the respective budgetary situation as well as the 'well-preparedness' of national pension systems due to previous reforms, thus the 'domestic and EMU vulnerability' (de la Porte and Natali 2014). The German 2014 reform substantiates the conclusion that a member state in a rather comfortable economic position is able to ignore pension-related recommendations and get away with it (interviews 16, 17). Previous implementation rates of the CSR, particularly with regard to the non-members of the Eurozone (European Parliament 2015), and the data that has emerged from the general compliance debate (e.g. Börzel and Knoll 2012) also indicate that a healthy dose of scepticism should be in place concerning 'catch-all' CSR influences. Second, the case of Italy shows that while formal instruments such as the EDPs and the European Semester are able to exert some pressure on member states in trouble, informal action was central for the 2011 Fornero reform. The sequencing of actions in the Italian case strongly suggests that European pressure rather than the crisis itself (such as in Germany and Sweden earlier on) was the decisive reform catalyst. While the finding by Hinrichs and Brosig (2013) that pension reforms would not have taken place in the absence of EU pressure in the countries considered can thus be confirmed for Italy, the other member states addressed in this paper demonstrate that no general qualitative leap has been made in terms of an increased Europeanization of national pension policies although some potential has been created but not yet fully used by the Commission and the Council. Instead, informal proceedings such as the ECB letter in the Italian case or the linking of ESF means to national reform success have been chosen so far, but whether they are indeed part of the future 'rules of the game' remains to be seen. Among the consulted experts, a large majority agrees with the statement that while increased fiscal governance influences, both formal and informal, have mainly manifested in countries in crisis so far, they have the potential to affect all member states in principle. Parallels to other areas of social policy can easily be drawn, e.g. to the field of healthcare for which Földes (2016: 306) concludes that while recommendations are non-binding and some member states frequently ignore them, 'the strengthened mechanism for fiscal surveillance has the potential to affect health systems at the core'. In any case, the crisis has functioned as a game-changer in one (and possibly a half, namely Poland) case(s) only while European influences actually decreased in the German case and remained at a negligible level in the Swedish one. The general budgetary situation as well as the outcomes of previous reforms, not least in terms of projections as regularly presented in the Annual Ageing Report, therefore seem to be the most adequate predictor of European influences on national pension policy in and after the crisis.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of Europeanization has long since arrived in the supposed national domain of social policy, although national rationale, internal dynamics and rhetoric continue to dominate the field – less in academic discourse, but quite obviously in politics and the media. In the terminology of Europeanization research, while in the observed cases there is no European-induced 'transformation' of national pension policies and my findings confirm the widespread scepticism towards the OMC in the literature, in some cases (Germany in the early 2000s, Italy since the onset of the crisis) a (partly) SGP-driven 'absorption' has occurred. The sovereign debt crisis has indeed functioned as a 'game changer' that re-adjusted the balance between European influence and national autonomy, but so far only for the countries hit most by the crisis. Two important reservations have to be stated: first, European influence in this supposed 'new phase' differs markedly depending on the respective budgetary situation as well as the ‘well-preparedness’ of national pension systems due to previous reforms. Second, informal rather than formal ways of exerting pressure were chosen, with yet unclear consequences for other member states and the European pension policy ‘architecture’ as a whole. In other words, while enforcement has so far only been possible in situations of severe crisis, it is too early to conclude whether the member states will be able to contain such mechanisms in economically better times or whether the new – formal and informal – rules will persist in ‘normal times’.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In the following, the term ‘crisis’ refers to the size of the financial and consequent economic and sovereign debt crisis from 2008 onwards for EU member states.

[2] The illusionary giant in Michael Ende's novel, Jim Knopf, appears to be enormous from a distance but shrinks to normal size when seen close to. Conversely, an illusionary dwarf would increase in size as the observer comes closer.

[3] Contrary to the dominant top-down approach of Europeanization (European influences on member states), some authors call for integrating the ‘other side of the loop’, namely member states’ influence on emerging European policies. This perspective is not taken up in this paper but cf. Börzel 2002 as a prominent example.

[4] Occupational pensions are excluded for the purpose of this article.

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